# 'Low' culture, laymen, and what we can learn from history[1]

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*Headline: Historical evidence shows strong interaction between philosophy and the emancipation of the common man or the rise of popular culture in Western Europe during the late Middle Ages and Early Modernity.*

It must have been around the 1530s that Dirck Volkertsz. Coornhert, the famous Dutch proponent of free thought and toleration, decided not to write any of his texts in Latin. This was, of course, an odd decision. Did not all scholars use Latin, many of them even going as far as to describe common language as rude, uncivilised and barbarian? For Coornhert, though, using his mother tongue was nothing less than a matter of principle. It was his conviction that knowledge should be accessible for every right-thinking individual, be he learned or layman. Hiding knowledge behind the walls of an exclusive language was therefore of no use. Hence, Coornhert wrote a vast number of Dutch texts, among which also *Zedekunst*, published in 1586, the first ethics to appear in any national language of post-Roman Europe.

Although Coornhert thus may have been the first to write a 'European' vernacular ethics, he certainly was not the first author who used the Dutch language as a means to transport moral ideas to a broad, non-Latin speaking audience. From as early as the thirteenth century onwards many authors deliberately wrote philosophical tracts in the vernacular.

This paper's aim is to shed light on the interaction between philosophy and popular culture from a historical point of view. I hope to show that philosophical ideas played an important role in one of the greatest shifts in Western civilization – namely the downfall of nobility and clergy and the rise of 'layman culture' during the late Middle Ages and Early Modernity. I will try to do so by considering the nature and function of vernacular philosophy in the Netherlands –or the Low Countries– between 1280 and 1600. It is in this unique and highly urbanised area that some important features of popular culture and modern Western citizenship arose, such as freedom of conscience, pragmatism, and social mobility. In this process, philosophical texts in the language of the common man are not merely a reflection of his world and life experience. Instead, these texts are clearly constructed for his moral instruction and the creation of responsible and self-conscious citizens. In this sense, vernacular philosophy functioned as an important intermediary between science and scholarship on the one hand and popular culture on the other.

On a more general level, my historical exposé supports the view that philosophy and culture interact with each other. Insofar as philosophy tries to answer real questions of concrete individuals relating to the world, human existence, and society, it can have a significant influence on cultural development. Our short history of the Low Countries will, I hope, teach us that philosophy can make a real difference in the lives of common people and can play an important role in popular culture.

## Two preliminary questions

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[1] This paper has been presented at a University of New Mexico conference on "Philosophy and (popular) culture", February 17th 2007, Albuquerque, NM. The proceedings are forthcoming.

What is so interesting about vernacular philosophy anyway? As these texts are produced for common people, would it not be wiser to invest our precious time to the study of Latin texts, which after all was the language of scholars – the language of Aquinas and Erasmus? Well, what makes vernacular texts interesting is their intended public: these texts were not meant for a Latin-speaking minority of scholars and scientists living in the relative isolation of their universities and monasteries, but for people living and acting in the 'real' world. By the real world I mean: the regional courts and the cities. Cities in particular were a factor of growing importance during the late Middle Ages. As a matter of fact, within the walls of these cities a new kind of human being came into existence: the citizen or *burgher*. Protected by their city walls and city privileges, these citizens were increasingly self-sufficient and 'bossy'. They were socially mobile and self-made men, pragmatists with specific intellectual needs. This 'new man' increasingly escaped the traditional three-class society that consisted of nobles, clergymen and peasants. More and more, the *burgher* began to form a kind of fourth class, intangible for the traditional three-class hierarchy.

If we plan to trace philosophy and its function in popular culture during this period, texts that were produced for this particular group of people are our best shot.

This may explain my interest in layman's culture as well as vernacular texts. But, and here is the second preliminary question, why should we be especially interested in *Dutch* sources? Why, in other words, would the region of the Low Countries (today roughly the Netherlands and Belgium) be of so much interest to us?

Well, for one thing, this part of Europe has had an important role in the transition from Middle Ages to Modernity and Enlightenment. During the Middle Ages it became one of the two most urbanised areas in Europe (the other one being Northern Italy). Trade became of utmost importance and Low Countries cities like Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent and Bruges became extremely wealthy. In the sixteenth century lack of effective centralised government led to a turbulent acceptance of the Reformation –and Calvinism in particular– and then to the famous Dutch Revolt, in which the Northern provinces (now roughly The Netherlands) began an eighty-years war against their Habsburg monarch Philip II, the emperor of the mighty Spanish empire that controlled vast parts of the world. In the seventeenth century the resulting tiny Republic of the Seven Provinces became a world power of itself, as it conquered the seas over Spain and Portugal. It is in this context, for instance, that the Dutch founded New Amsterdam, nowadays better known as New York.

Intellectually, the Low Countries were a melting pot of new ideas. It is here that, during the seventeenth century, Descartes wrote and published his revolutionary books and Spinoza, an Amsterdam Jew, developed his rationalistic and naturalistic ideas. It is here, that the Enlightenment actually began, as Princeton Professor Jonathan Israel concluded only recently.[2] But already in the Middle Ages, the Low Countries had an unique position in European culture. Just as in Italy, the high degree of urbanisation made possible an "emancipation of the common man", resulting in a basic conception of individuality. Of course, the late medieval and early modern notion of individuality was still very different from the type of individuality we experience today, but it nevertheless was a great step beyond the conception of the self that was based on the three-class society. In the wake of this development also the notion of individual consciousness could grow. Already during the fifteenth century, typical layman movements arose in the Low Countries; movements that combined Christian piety with a strong sense of individual consciousness and a personal relation to God (*Devotio moderna*). The mercantile spirit of the Low Countries' citizens together with this awareness of religious and moral

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[2]     See Israel 2001 and 2006.

individuality led to a strong sense of toleration, which was seen as the most effective way to streamline society and social relations. Needless to say, the notion of toleration was of great importance to the rise of Modernity, and to the division of Church and State in particular.

Though other regions of Europe showed similar developments, the Low Countries may serve as an important example of the early modern development of popular culture.


## Vernacular philosophy in the Low Countries (1280-1600)

Let's have a look, then, at vernacular texts on philosophy in the Low Countries in the period between 1280 and 1600.[3]

I will explore two perspectives that in my view are dominant in this tradition:

A.      'downsizing' philosophy: i.e. forging a rational attitude for the *populus*, the people.

B.      'upgrading' popular culture: i.e. justifying common life practice.

*A. The 'downsizing' or popularisation of philosophy*

When one reads these late medieval and early modern vernacular texts, one will be surprised by the emphasis that authors put on reason and its ideal role in the lives of the commoners. After all, we are used to the image of the Middle Ages as a profoundly religious period, that had no high value of human reason. Of course, we philosophers know our bit of medieval philosophy and we are familiar with the important role reason plays in the work of Thomas Aquinas and the like. But if we look away from the context of medieval university life, we are used to believe that people lived in an almost thoughtless piety. The so-called Dark Ages are the centuries in which the light of reason was hindered by the omnipresence of faith in common life or, if you please, in popular culture. The idea of self-conscious individuals within the medieval world is not too familiar to us.

It is therefore refreshing to read texts of a philosophical nature that are clearly meant for and read by commoners with a great deal of self-consciousness.

Jacob van Maerlant, for one, stated around 1280:

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| He who wants to follow wisdom/ | Wie so der wijsheit wille volgen, |
| Should stay calm/ | Wiltu bliven onverbolgen |
| And live by right reason/ | Ende met rechter redene leven, |
| He should with all his heart/ | Du moetster toe dijn herte geven |
| Reflect and consider/ | Te vorpeinsene ende te vorwegene |
| What he could come across. | Al dat di mach comen te jegene.[4] |

The basic idea being that

| | |
|---|---|
| Man does not possess anything better | Die mensce en hevet niet beters in |
| Than reason and intellect. | Dan redene ende zin.[5] |

Animals do not possess this quality of reasoning. It is a unique gift from God to mankind. And therefore, Maerlant continues:

| | |
|---|---|
| If [man] follows [reason], he is superior | In desen doene, in derre maniere, |

3      For some more information on the authors considered here, see at the end of this contribution.

4      *Spiegel historiael* ['Mirror of history'] (*Sp.hist.*) I, 8/ kap. 34 *Seneca van groter wijsheden* ['Seneca of great wisdom'], line 1-14 (ed. De Vries–Verwijs 1863, part I, p. 412).

5      *Sp.hist.* I, 8, LXXI/ line 5-6.

| to the animals (…). In doing so, man follows God. | Hevet hi vordeel voer die diere, (…) In desen volget hi Gode naer.[6] |

Writing some fifty years later, around 1330, Jan van Boendale supplied his readers with a large amount of moral advice. In his moral exposition *Lekenspiegel*, or *Layman's Mirror*, reason is omnipresent. Living in accordance with reason, Boendale asserted, is the best road to success. Dirc Potter, writing his works between 1410 and 1430, called upon his readers to follow an inner authority: reason. Throughout Potters work, reason is the ultimate justification ground of the virtues he proclaims. With the help of rationality – Potter sometimes refers to it as *prudentia* or prudence– one is able to

help oneself and earn a living, as well as lead a happy life and obtain an eternal life.[7]

From the 1430s onward the so-called rhetoricians took control of the literary landscape of the Low Countries. They gathered in their so-called 'chambers of rhetoric', specialised in competing with other members and other chambers in tournaments that tested their rhetorical skills. The works produced were as diverse as their numbers were, but many a fifteenth century rhetorician accepted reason as an instrument through which man 'truly realizes the meaning of God's creation'.[8] Reason in the view of these rhetoricians, was not only a useful means to acquire an attitude of accepting misfortune, but it could also be seen as a means to actively manipulate the course of things in nature and in social life. During the sixteenth century, vernacular writers such as Dirck Volkertszoon Coornhert continued to treat reason kindly. For Coornhert, reason was the 'divine spark' [*voncxken des Godlijcken Lichts*] in man, connecting him with his divine origin. Through reason, man would be able to reach to the heavens, as it unlocks the door to truth, beauty, and a life of moral perfection. In Coornhert's words:

| For [the eye of reason] only beholds the true end of all good, that is God, the fountain of all good and goodness in Himself. | Want haar oghe [nl. van de opperste rede] ziet alleenlyck op het ware eynde alre ghoeden, dat is op Gode, alder ghoeden fonteyne ende de ghoedheyd zelf.[9] |

Reason, Coornhert continues, is a 'clear mirror (…) in which the sun of eternal intellect directly beams its own image'.[10]

It is in these ways that vernacular texts promoted a philosophical attitude towards life and strongly incited to 'personal rationality'. But this is not to say that, in doing so, authors simply copied academic philosophical views to the popular context. On the contrary, philosophy was carefully accommodated to the actual situation of a public that lacked a common background of learning. First of all, most of the traditional philosophical disciplines were absolutely useless to the common man. Vernacular authors therefore did not care much for metaphysics, physics or logic. Instead, they offered their readers practical philosophy: knowledge about *how they should live*; in other words, ethics. Moreover, the type of ethics they presented to vernacular readers was quite different from ethics as it was taught at the universities. Authors were not interested in the long and subtle arguments of scholars, but searched for a compact, easy-to-apply body of

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[6]     *Sp.hist.* I, 8, LXXI/ line 7-8.
[7]     'u selven mede helpen moecht ende den cost daer mede winnen moecht ende oic een heerlijc leven mede leyden moecht ende dat ewighe leven daer mede winnen moecht', see *Blome der doechden*, f. 130 verso. See also Corbellini 2000, p. 149.
[8]     See Pleij 1985, p. 81.
[9]     *Zedekunst* (*Zd.k.*) II, ii, 21.
[10]    *Zd.k.* II, ii, 26 and II, ii, 25.

ethical rules, such as these particularly could be found in the works of the classical authors. Hence, vernacular authors included all kinds of classical maxims and citations in their texts. This commonsensical approach, in which many ideas of classical and Christian origin were incorporated, was much better adapted to the lives of the people that were addressed by vernacular texts. The focus on practical life and how one should behave is also evidenced by the fact that many texts discuss ethics and etiquette alike. Boendale, for one, tells us to lead a prudent and modest life, at the same time explaining social rules and table etiquette. The result is a varied guide to civilised life.

## B. 'Upgrading' or philosophising popular culture.

If philosophy was being 'down-sized' for effective popular use, vernacular texts also often sought to intellectualise and in fact justify some of the basic characteristics of late-medieval popular culture; in other words, they tried to upgrade it. Almost all vernacular authors I met with and read during my investigations, attempted to legitimate city-life and mercantilism. Often, they also explicate their conviction that common people, too, can be responsible and conscious individuals who choose for themselves.

Some authors, though, dared go still further in their acceptance of popular culture. Striking examples of this are Boendale and Potter, whose interpretation of reason shows a rather unexpected side. Admittedly, for these authors too, reason is a controlling factor in the emotional economy of man, as a rational attitude leads to modesty: 'No-one should desire too much', Boendale says, 'Instead, one should stay calm and modest'.[11]

But according to Boendale and Potter, reason is not only a sound instrument to modesty and self-control, it can also make life happier on a more practical level, as reason helps you to get what you want. Reason is to be used to defend and increase one's personal honour and reputation, one's rights and one's belongings. Reason is an indispensable means to influence one's *environment* as well. Employing reason, thus, is necessary both to control the inner world of the emotions and to influence the outside world.

In the work of Boendale and Potter this leads to quite a new interpretation of the interaction between the individual and the outside world. Modesty is a nice thing, that's for sure, but never should one go so far as to forget one's own interest. In fact, both Boendale and Potter attach great value to self-interest. In discussing the core Christian value of charity or neighbourly love, Boendale stresses that the Bible tells us to love our neighbours *as* ourselves. 'It does not say', he writes, '*more than* ourselves. For many have suffered from that'.[12] 'So', he continues, 'you should love the other in such a way that it does not harm you'.[13] This is hardly what one expects from a text aiming at medieval laymen. Yet in Potter's work one finds the same. Indeed, Potter speaks his mind even more openly.

We should take this positive evaluation of self-interest as a deliberate intellectual underpinning of the common attitude of common people living in the turbulent environment of the Middle Ages. Late-medieval city life was full of dangers of both a social and a physical nature. Self-interest was of the utmost importance for personal survival and vernacular authors just offered the justification of such an attitude. This also clarifies the abundant presence of classical thinkers in their works, whose texts were far more suited for the daily practice of non-learned people: Christian texts were often too

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[11]     'Niement en sal verwillen,/ Elc sal hem selven stillen/Ende hem houden in maten', see *Lekenspiegel* (*Lsp.*) III 3, lines 507-509.

[12]     'Maer meer dan ons en staet daer niet;/ Want daer is den menighen of comen/ Vele scaden, scanden ende onvromen', see *Lsp.* III 20, lines 50-52.

[13]     'Hebt enen andren lief alsoe/ Dat ghire niet in en wert ghescaet', see *Lsp.* III 3, lines 223-224.

abstract or too focused on religious piety, whereas writers like Seneca, Epiktètos and Cato offered all kinds of ideas on how to manage one's life in a more practical sense.


## Conclusion

We now have seen that vernacular philosophy aimed to fulfil an intermediate role in medieval culture. Authors who chose to write in the language of common people, tried to extract valuable knowledge from 'official philosophy', as taught at the universities, and sought to transport this knowledge to a public consisting of unlearned laymen. In this process, they were well aware of the need to accommodate their message to their readers. In order to do so, they selected useful philosophical ideas –mainly with regard to morals– and presented these in a way unlearned people could actually understand and use them.

Also, they tried to create an intellectual underpinning of popular culture. They sought to legitimate citizenship and mercantilism. Some even went so far as to formulate justifications for self-interest, a key feature of medieval popular culture – and one much despised by scholars. In doing so, vernacular philosophers showed a real interest in their intended readers. Vernacular authors thus created moral-practical guidebooks for self-made men and medieval yuppies.

Vernacular philosophy thus contributed to popular culture and, what is more, it was a stimulating force in the emancipation of common man. In this way, it took part in the rise of a new world order, in which commoners could raise their voices more easily and shape their lives more freely. Philosophy could only do this, however, by accommodating itself to the needs of the common man. It had to take interest in the way common people experienced their world. And this may well be a general lesson we could learn from history: philosophy only makes sense when it seeks to connect to real life.

However that may be, vernacular philosophy really made a difference in late medieval and early modern European culture.

The example of vernacular philosophy in early modern Europe raises all kinds of interesting new questions that are yet to be answered. It is clear that there exists a big difference between vernacular philosophy and the 'mainstream' scholastic tradition of the period. But what, precisely, is the relation between these two traditions? What kind of academic sources did vernacular authors use? And how exactly did they transform them to meet the demands of their own product, directed as it was to a different and unlearned audience? Or, the other way around, we might also ask whether vernacular philosophy influenced scholastic thinkers.

Yet another interesting area of research concerns the relation of vernacular philosophy with humanism. After all, humanists shared many characteristics with the vernacular tradition. They, too, were mostly interested in how man should live. And they, too, tried to approach ethics in a pragmatic, less theoretical way. Again, many humanists did not identify themselves with traditional university teaching (e.g. Erasmus). Instead, they tried hard to relate to real-life problems and the actual events, such as wars, taking place in the actual world they lived in. But humanism, of course, is a typically high-culture phenomenon. Humanists were highly learned 'universal men', who believed truth to be found in the knowledge from Antiquity. They preferred to use eloquent and complex Latin sentences and often looked down on common culture and the so-called barbarism of the unlearned masses.

It is my intuition that during the sixteenth century vernacular philosophy and humanism to some extent converged. Coornhert, for instance, should be taken as a humanist spirit writing in Dutch. He was part of the so-called 'Republic of Letters' –the network of

scholars throughout Europe–, and corresponded with high-culture humanists such as the famous Leiden professor Justus Lipsius, as well as with humanist book printers like the Antwerp publisher Christoffel Plantijn. As a preliminary hypothesis, I would like to suggest that towards the end of the sixteenth century vernacular philosophy reached full maturity. Vernacular authors had by that time succeeded in successfully 'educating' and 'emancipating' their laymen audience.

Coornhert is a clear example of this fusion of humanist and vernacular trends. Coornhert himself was to have quite some impact on seventeenth century authors, as he influenced progressive forces within the Dutch Reformed Church. He can even be connected to the radical Amsterdam circle around Spinoza, in which people like Lodewijk Meyer and Jarich Jelles took up ideas relating to the nature and function of reason thus linking Coornhert's work indirectly to the early Enlightenment.

It is in this way that we are all to some extent children of the vernacular tradition in philosophy that helped shape our own way of looking at the world.

## Important vernacular authors in the Low Countries between 1280 and 1600

| Authors | Main works |
|---|---|
| Jacob van Maerlant (c. 1230-c. 1300) | *Spiegel historiael* (1290)<br>*Wapene Martijn* (-)<br>*Rijmbijbel* (-) |
| Jan van Boendale (1280-1365) | *Der leken spieghel* (1325-1328)<br>*Het boec van Sidrac* (1329)<br>*Het Boec vander wraken* (-) |
| Dirc Potter (c. 1370-1428) | *Blomme der doechden* (-)<br>*Van Mellibeo ende van sinre vrouwen Prudencia* (-)<br>*Der minnen loep* (c. 1411) |
| the rhetoricians (from 1430 onwards) | many poems, plays, songs and other texts |
| Dirck Volckertsz. Coornhert (1522-1590) | *Synodus van der conscientien vryheydt* (1582)<br>*Zedekunst dat is wellevenskunste* (1585)<br>*Opperste ghoeds nasporinghe* (1590) |

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